A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY
Luke 24:13-21; 28-35
April 9, 1978

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

One time the late Robert Kennedy's parish priest asked him what he thought about religion. As you know, Kennedy was a devout Roman Catholic. His answer was very interesting: in fact, I think about it frequently. He said: "Religion is so important in life. I want my kids to like it. You all (clergy) should not be talking about God up there so much. I want to know what God is like down here."

Kennedy was a well-educated man. But nowhere was he more eloquent than in that simple statement: "Not God up there, but down here." That is the issue, isn't it? It is the question of relevance, meaning, importance. Is the subject ot religion a remote theological abstraction or something tangible that has to do with my life? If we can't deal with this one we are in deep trouble indeed, for religion as a cultural tradition seems to be failing rapidly. People don't go to church much any more simply because it is the thing to do. In the place of the older assumption that religious institutions are somehow good and necessary in and of themselves, there is a refreshing and sometimes frightening new integrity adrift in the land. Religion must be relevant. Its God must have something to do with the here and now.

The issue was contained, brilliantly and with great humor, I thought, in the motion picture, Oh God! God, played by George Burns, keeps appearing to a modest and unassuming supermarket manager, played by John Denver. The appearances happen in ordinary, mundane places: the aisle of the supermarket, the shower, the automobile. It takes a long time for Denver to recognize that when he is talking to Burns he is talking to God. Significantly, neither God nor His man ever show up in church. Institutional religion enters the picture only in the caricature of a transparently phony and obnoxious evangelist, and a ponderous group of ecclesiastical officials and theologians who all but condemn Denver for heresy. Just as interesting as the movie, however, was the reaction from some quarters of the religious population. People were insulted, offended and scandalized. Some picketed theaters where the movie was showing. Without giving the movie more theological credit than it deserves, I couldn't help but reflect on the fact that people reacted to Jesus in the same way. Good, orthodox, religious people were insulted, offended and scandalized. Perhaps the conclusion is obvious. Perhaps people always react in that manner when God comes too close. When a safely remote and abstract theological proposition takes on flesh and confronts us in life, perhaps we can count on people taking offense, or at least getting nervoue. In any event, I was amused to read that in a recent poll to determine the most influential religious leaders in our nation, Billy Graham was first: William Thompson, Clerk of our General Assembly, was tenth - and that George Burns received two votes.

In the season of Eastertide, when preachers are tired, and church programs are gearing down and we're all looking for a little rest before the frantic pace of autumn begins again, the issue that presents itself is the everyday relevance of religion. The high point of the church year is Easter. We take a long time to prepare for it. We celebrate it in grand style. Our Sanctuary is full, the flowers are gorgeous, the music exquisite. And in the weeks after the fact we wonder what in the world we can do for an encore. Theologically, however, we are driven to the conclusion that if we have to ask that question we have missed the point: we have celebrated the wrong thing on Easter. In fact, I fear sometimes that we are guilty of just that. We isolate the empty tomb of Easter morning, puzzle about a bodily resurrection for several hours, sing about it and then forget it, missing altogether

the Christian message of Easter which has to do with the presence of the Risen Christ in the midst of the world. There is a sense in which the more gloriously we observe the Easter Event the more inclined we are to forget the Easter Gospel; namely, that Jesus Christ is alive; that God continues to make His dwelling among us: that the theater of His appearance is life itself, even our life. That is the issue of relevance: the point, it seems to me, of our New Testament Lesson this morning.

If you read the New Testament accounts of the resurrection carefully it is clear that the emphasis is not so much on the awesome and mysterious assertion that a dead body got up and walked out of a tomb as it is on the fact that the disciples became convinced that Jesus Christ was alive and, in a special way, still with them. That is what accounts for the birth and rise of Christianity: not the celebration of a memory, but the conviction that Almighty God, in Jesus Christ, was present in life in a terribly immediate and powerful way.

Return to Easter Day for a moment. Jesus was dead and now it was Sunday, the first day of a new week. On Saturday, I imagine the disciples together in their locked room, trying to come to grips with the unspeakable tragedy that had happened the afternoon before. I see them pacing back and forth, trying to make conversation, being a little more solicitous to one another than usual. But now, Sunday, Jerusalem was looking like Columbus on Monday morning. Life was going to proceed as if nothing had happened. There is always something stunning about that realization - to walk to your car after a funeral and see the sun still shining and traffic moving and the drug store still open and life happening. Two of them decided to go for a walk, to get away for a while, to escape, frankly, from the pall of grief, the lingering guilt, the deep doubts, the beautiful vision that had died on Friday. A few hysterical women had come to their hiding place clamoring about an empty tomb, but all that did was make the tension greater and the gloom thicker.

So they headed out for Emmaus, a town a few miles outside Jerusalem. We don't know why they went but I'm assuming that the best thing about Emmaus was that it was not Jerusalem. As they walked they were joined by a third man with whom they discussed the events of the past several days. They persuaded the stranger to share the evening meal with them in Emmaus. And when, at table, the stranger broke the bread, blessed it and handed it to them, they suddenly, remarkably recognized Him. It was Jesus, alive, sitting right there at the dinner table with them! Scholars have always toyed with the curious thing about this story; namely, the fact that they didn't know Him immediately. It is one of the oddest cases of mistaken identity on record. Some have suggested that they were walking into a setting sun and consequently couldn't see Him very well. My sense of it is that something important about the resurrection is stated here. Just as Mary thought He was the gardener at first, so these two good friends did not recognize Him. That is to say, the Risen Christ is not simply the same old Jesus returned to life. His appearance is different now. The resurrection points to an even greater reality than the resuscitation of a dead body - the continuing, ongoing presence of God in life. And as soon as they recognized Him He left: disappeared: got up and walked out, if you will. Before they could nail it down, before they had opportunity to draw a picture or write a poem or even say a prayer, the experience was over. One fleeting moment of revelation: one instant of certainty and then they were alone again. That too, I feel, is a provocative suggestion about the way the Divine breaks into life.

The setting is very important. The two disciples were engaging in that common human behavior pattern called escapism. Everyone does it some of the time: some people are doing it all of the time. In fact, escapism is an important motif in much of the best contemporary literature. Jean Paul Sartre wrote a play, No Exit, about a hell which looks suspiciously like an ordinary complex of human relations - but from which there is no escaping. John Updike in his novels consistently tells the stories of people who live out their lives desperately trying to escape from ordinariness. Theologians take Updike seriously because his people are looking for salvation, by running away from life - as Rabbit Run; jumping from one bed to another in grim desperation in Couples, or seeking meaning in fantasy in the recent Marry Me. Updike knows that the sickness of heart of modern culture is that we look for our salvation somewhere other than the place we now are, usually in booze and sex; but there is no escape.

If contemporary literature is not your cup of tea, the slick magazines that crowd the drug store shelf proclaim the same gospel. If you have not done it before flip through the twin New Testaments of escapism, Cosmopolitan and Playboy. There, cover to cover, in advertisements, pictures, articles and editorials, you will encounter the gospel: what to wear, eat, drive, read, listen to and whom to seek sexually in order to escape that rather ordinary person who is you and that embarassingly ordinary life you live every day.

We spend a lot of time and money escaping. In fact it seems sometimes as if we simply are putting in time between vacations: regarding the in-between-periods as valuable only insofar as they provide for the next escape.

Why? There are many answers to that. One of them is that we have become convinced, at least partially, that the gospel of Cosmo and Hugh Heffner is true: that real life, whatever that is, is out there somewhere, but not here, where I put in my time. One of the answers is that the burden can get heavy, that the pressure of business and parenting and the frantic pace at which we do most of living can become oppressive and we need a blessed interruption, a weekend away, an afternoon in a movie theater or whatever. But one answer that intrigues me is one suggested by the mystical religions of the East; namely, that we Americans will do almost anything to escape ourselves: that our greatest fear is solitariness and aloneness. We are told, with justification, I believe, that we never learn to know ourselves, we don't trust our own feelings, but depend on other authorities to tell us how to feel. And as a consequence we can't even articulate our own deepest needs as persons. The Dutch Roman Catholic Henri Nouwen writes, "Only when we have come in touch with our own life experiences and have learned to listen to our own inner cravings for liberation and new life can we realize that Jesus did not just speak, but that He reached out to us in our most personal needs. The Gospel doesn't just contain ideas worth remembering. It is a message responding to our individual human condition." (Reaching Out, p.62).

Emmaus, than, is wherever we go to escape. It is whatever we do to escape self: it is the place we go looking for the joy and meaning we are not finding in life. It is where we spend most of our time. And it is the place that Jesus Christ comes to meet us. That is the Gospel.

The Emmaus two didn't recognize Him, which is to say that we must lay down our preconceived notions. We think we know, don't we, what a religious experience

feels like? We think we know what the Divine looks like in life. I suppose they did too and they almost missed it when it happened. Without discounting anyone's private religious experience, the whole trouble with the Born Again fad is that people begin to expect and to structure it. Some make that most arrogant of assertions: "If your religious experience has not been the same as mine you are not a Christian and you'd better get with it." Again, Henry Nouwen: "Many people flock to places and persons who promise intensive experiences of togetherness, cathartic emotions of exhilaration, and liberating sensations of ecstacy. In our desperate need for fulfillment and our restless search for the experience of divine intimacy, we are all to prone to construct our own spiritual events." (Ibid. p.92).

It didn't happen in a blaze of light for the disciples. It wasn't even an emotional upheaval. Rather their encounter with Jesus Christ happened quietly, at the dinner table. It wasn't in church: it wasn't the sacrament of Holy Communion. Rather it was the most ordinary of events, an evening meal.

That is the direction this story takes us. We believe that Jesus Christ is alive and present in the world. We believe that we meet Him here in the company of His people. But we will also meet Him out there, where it may be a little more difficult to recognize Him. He'll be there, on dusty roads to Emmaus: in the faces of people we don't recognize. He told us that we would meet Him when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked and give a cup of water to those who thirst. Difficult as it may be to recognize Him, that is where He is: in that unending stream of people who walk into this building every day for food: in the people who are looking for a coat and a pair of gloves: in the desperate mother of five who finds herself evicted from her apartment and with no place to spend the night. That is where He has promised to be. And that is why I believe, with everything in me, that we have no alternative but to be in mission here in this place, this Emmaus, this dusty road.

But look for Him too in the ordinariness of your life: your comings and goings, your private escapes and the everyday routine. Look for Him at the very place He came to His disciples - at your dinner table. Expect Him there, in the most complex and difficult and beautiful of your relationships. See Him in your children, for a change. See Him in that precious gift of love they are willing to give to you. Be aware of Him in the sheer miracle of grace - the patient love extended over a thousand dinner tables by your wife or husband. Know that He prefers to be present when you and your dearest friends break bread together. And begin to trust yourself, your needs, your feelings and experiences, your perceptions of life. You don't always need to turn to a minister or a book to find God. Instead of running from aloneness, expect Jesus Christ to meet you in it. Expect Him to understand your deepest needs, your most urgent concerns. He has promised to be there.

Mary mistook Him for a gardener. The two disciples thought He was a stranger. So, it is easy, perhaps even normal, to go through life without ever recognizing the Divine in our midst. Sacred moments, if Scripture is to be trusted, are often ordinary moments: miracles happen for those who can see. One of the privileges of ministry is to spend time regularly in hospitals - where incredible miracles of healing happen every day if one has the eyes to see them.

One of my favorite writers is Frederick Beuchner. Listen to his prose - on this matter, so difficult to put into proper words:

> "If we look with our hearts, if we listen with all our being and our imagination...if we live from the miracle of one instant of our precious lives to the miracle of the next - what we may see is Jesus himself, what we may hear is the first faint sound of a voice somewhere deep within us saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives, whether we can understand it or not, and this purpose follows behind us through all our doubting and being afraid, through all our indifference and boredom, to a moment when suddenly we know for sure that everything does make sense because everything is in the hands of God..." (The Magnificent Defeat, p.88).

You can miss that. You must learn to live with eyes and heart and mind open. The promise of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ is alive: that you won't find Him in a tomb - or behind a locked door, but on the road of life, that dusty trek to Emmaus. It is His promise to meet you there.

Amen.

Our Father, you have come to us as a stranger and we have not recognized You. Help us to see Your face in the faces of others: to hear Your voice in the voices of those around us: to know Your presence in life. And when, in moments of clarity, we know, give us that special grace to laugh and celebrate - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.